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UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL BULLYING

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Abstract

Recent research draw attention to an increased number and new forms of bullying and violent actions in schools. The article appeared as a need to investigate the phenomenon from different perspective, in different contexts and to identify best methods to address the problem. Due to the fact that most of the child education and a great amount of bullying actions happen in schools (as well as in residential care settings) we applied two questionnaires anonymously completed by 74 teachers, educators, social workers and 500 students, aged 12- 17 years old, from Arges county. The aim was to investigate how subjects perceive what bullying is, how to identify any kind of hidden bullying behaviour, how to deal with the problem, to prevent and tackle bullying in all its form. The findings show the inability of teachers to efficiently communicate with students, inability in coping with them, pedagogical insufficient training on how to identify and prevent bulling. The results from the study identified strong relation between having a high depression and anxiety score and being a bully. The male to female ratio of bullies is 3 to 1. These facts justify the need for developing and carrying out continuous training of teachers, in order to increase public awareness of all forms of bullying against children, develop activities to prevent such aggressions and promoting the rights of children for a safe environment, and to elaborate and offer effective programs to identify, speak out and reduce the level of bullying in schools.

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1. Introduction

Over the past 10 years the flow of students in schools changed due to ratification of UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and EU Strategy 2020 to build a more inclusive society led to an increased number of children with disabilities in mainstream schools and children with profound disabilities from medical institution to special schools. Taking into account that teachers from both systems, mainstream and special one, had to cope with students with special educational needs and also students had to accept to learn together led to causing an increased number and new forms of bullying and violent actions in schools as recent surveys shows. Moreover, the fast paced of society we live in and the information flow, especially on social media, made difficult for professionals to identify and to be able to stand up when a bullying action is to happen. Several studies (Clark et al., 1993; Dillon, 2015; O'Moore et al., 2004) show that a global trend of the current generation of children is to have a lot of more emotional problems than in the past. The research was undertaken as a need to investigate the phenomenon from different perspective, in different context and to identify best methods to address the problem. It is well-known that bullying against children especially towards those from residential care settings has witnessed large amplitude and despite the importance and extent of this phenomenon, it is not decreasing, on the contrary it is expanding. Moreover, it is important to update all outputs as bullying nowadays due to fast-paced development of technology has been taken new and less known forms, as cyber bullying. We strongly believe that by empowering specialists working with children (teachers, educators, social workers) with knowledge about how to identify different forms of bullying and gain competences and skills to fight against any aggression in schools will reduce the number of bullying acts in schools and residential care settings. Studies (Constantinescu & Constantinescu, 2012) identified as important factors of increased aggressiveness in schools - poor communications skills of teachers with students, pedagogical insufficient training, low motivation for their profession. These facts justify the need for developing and carrying out continuous training of teachers, in order to increase public awareness of all forms of bullying against children, develop activities to prevent such aggressions and promoting the rights of children for a safe environment, and to initiate programs to reduce the level of bullying in schools. Dillon (2015) urges the importance of initiating prevention programs and aiming to empower teachers with necessary tools to be able to develop a "no bullying, no hate" culture within the school and communities, because people are basically good and want to have positive relationships with others.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. Theoretical framework: bullying phenomena

In order to fight against bullying, it is important to understand what bullying is. Smith and Sharp (1998) define this phenomenon as "the systematic abuse of power", and it involves the repeated abuse of power in relationships (Smith, 2014). Bullying is long-standing violence, mental or physical, conducted by an individual or a group against an individual who is not able to defend himself or herself in that actual situation (Roland, 1989, cited in Mellor, 1999). The act of bullying has some characteristics that makes it different from a quarrel or a fight between peers. Bullying is done deliberately with the intention to hurt hurtful, it is repeated over a period of time and represent an abuse of power, making difficult for victims to defend themselves against. Researchers identified several types of bullying: verbal (name-calling, teasing,

sarcasm, spreading false rumours, sexual abusive or threatening comments, making negative remarks about a person's culture, religion; skin colour; family, home, sexual orientation, gender, identity etc., saying negative things about someone's look/body appearance, making remarks about disability or physical condition), isolation (being unfriendly, being excluded from groups, deliberately leaving someone out, taking friends away from someone, telling other people not to be friends with someone), physical (hitting, kicking, punching, taking, hiding or damaging someone belongings, hair-pulling, pushing), gesture bullying (offensive and threatening gestures), cyber bullying (hate emails or text-messages). The main types of bullying (as stated in the *Anti-Bullying Policy of the Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Primary School*, 2015, are based on: appearance (e.g. hair colour, body shape/weight, clothing); disability, special needs, medical condition; race/ethnicity (e.g. racial taunts, gestures - racism); gender identity (e.g. transgender, different to typical gender norms); home (class background, free school meals, looked after); sex (intimidating/harmful attitudes or language (e.g. bitch) (sexism); sexual orientation (e.g. Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual (LGB) people or family members (real or perceived) (homophobia/biphobia). This phenomenon has to be seen as a community issue, and not the problem of the child, parent or teacher. Bullying is a form of aggressive behaviour that is conducted by a young person or group of young people, on systematic and ongoing basis, against a young person who is singled out, and it relatively unable to defend himself or herself (O'Moore & Minton, 2004).

2.2. Anti-Bullying Policy in Schools

Anti-Bullying Policy in Schools Anti-bullying policies were formulated (O'Moore & Minton, 2004) to minimize the risk of bullying by raising awareness and providing strategies for prevention, as well as offering strategies for dealing with any incidents of bullying should they arise. The common European strategy against bullying, recently summarized by the European Anti-Bullying Network (EAN), "Build future, stop bullying" adopts a school wide approach, a gender sensitive and inclusive perspective. The policy is aiming to prevent bullying amongst the entire school community, including school staff, teachers, pupils, families, volunteers. School in Europe (Smith et. al., 2008) are legally required to have an anti-bullying policy, but reports confirms lack of coverage in important areas. According to European Strategy against bullying, schools should develop an anti-bullying policy with strategies and measures to encourage good behaviour and prevent all forms of bullying amongst pupils, and also staff. Anti-Bullying policies are aiming to prevent other negative consequences of bullying like school failure, and other inappropriate behaviours in terms of social relation, self-affirmation, self-realization (Dumitrescu, 2017). Anti-Bullying policies should consist of a set of clear measures on what a bullying act is, how to identify it, how to report, investigate and record it, the roles of every actor involved (students, teachers, parents, community); and countering strategies on conflict resolution and conflict management strategies and also on the prevention of bullying behaviours.

3. Research Questions

The paper is presenting the results of a quantitative and qualitative analysis of bullying phenome from Arges County, Romania over the last 2 years (2015-2017). This current study explores the impact and

consequences of bullying acts on school environment, as well as testing some supportive services of teachers and psychologist on further bullying prevention.

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the research was to explore bullying phenomena, and identify teachers as a resource to help prevent and reduce any form of bullying and aggression in the school environment and beyond it. A great amount of bullying actions happens in schools where usually bullying thrives as they present a more non-structured setting that can generate episodes of bullying due also to the lengthy periods of unsupervised time teenagers spend together. The motivation of this study comes from the need for qualitative and data on the bullying phenomenon in order to better understand the motivations underlying these behaviours and the extent of this phenomenon in the social context in Romania.

4.1. Research objectives:

In order to achieve the above-mentioned aim, the project is setting the following *objectives*:

- To measure the incidence of bullying behaviours in school, group of friends and the online environment;
- To improve understanding of bullying from the child perspective (perceptions, attitudes and behaviours in different social context: school, group of friends, online environment);
- To improve the school climate and the performance of students, by enabling them to recognize, express and manage their emotions and feelings and to live positively together with others.

4.2. Research hypothesis:

If students have knowledge and understand what is bullying, how to detect it, then they would be able to report it and stand out.

5. Research Methods

To achieve the proposed research objectives, we have used as working methods: questionnaire, interview, and SPSS Program for data analysis. Research plan was following a descriptive and intervention type of research. The Teacher Interview explored the knowledge of bullying phenomena, countering strategies, conflict resolution and conflict management skills. The Child Questionnaire (30 items) applied envisaged to explore reporting modalities of bullying act, to investigate the incidence of different bullying behaviours, to identify all environments in which they occur, etc. Most of the questionnaires were directly, but also 30 % of answers were gathered using online replies. This helped us to find out how student perceive bullying, if they know to recognize when a bullying act took place and if they know to report, stand out or solve the challenging situation. Afterwards, we envisaged a *statically analysis* of children perception on various type of bullying and their countering strategies. The population investigated was formed by 500 children, from 6 to 18 years old from Arges county. Also, we did a statistical analysis to see if there is any correlation between bullying and gender or place of origin. The data collection was undertaken for a period of 2 years (2015-2017). The responses indicate three types of bullying: physical bullying (Ph); verbal bullying (Vb) and Social bullying (S). The items of each dimension were summed up and a score for each

type of bullying were indicated. At the same time the data were statistically analysed using SPSS program. 500 students from primary and secondary schools from Arges county were selected. For the research implementation, a group of 74 teachers and school psychologist were instructed to observe and collect data every time a bullying act happened. The sample used is representative for the school population (under-18s), with a tolerance of +/- 3%, at a confidence level of 95%.

6. Findings

The results from questionnaires indicate the presence of four types of bullying happening in schools and outside the school (group of friends and on-line community): physical bullying (Ph); verbal bullying (Vb); Social bullying (S) and Cyberbullying (C). The items of each dimension were summed up and a score to offer an overview of bullying incidence. At the same time the data were statistically analysed using SPSS program. The quantitative dimension of the bullying forms and types is presented below. First of all, we were interested in exploring the understanding of the bullying concept by the investigated population. From all data gathered less than 50 % of the total population know what bullying is (Figure 01).

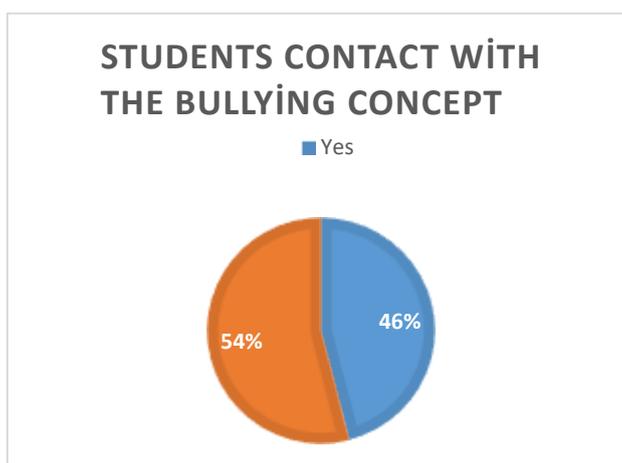


Figure 01. [The distribution of students knowing what bullying is]

When it comes to exploring what they understand and what bullying is, we centralized all answers according to the four types of bullying presented above. Most of the students from the group of students (46%) knowing what bullying is identified it under the type of physical and verbal bullying (Figure 02).

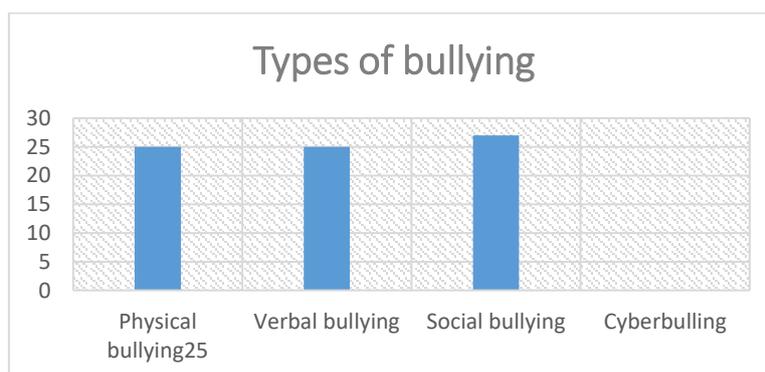


Figure 02. Distribution of types of bullying identified by respondents

The findings show clearly a lack of knowledge on what bullying is and a mixed up perception of violence, aggression, friends quarrel and bullying. The question we raise is if we can stand out to something we don't understand and can't detect. Less than 50 % of the students never heard of bullying or they don't know what bullying is. But also, from the 46 % of students that have heard about bullying have not a clear perception on what makes a friend quarrel or an aggressive act – bullying. Alarming was the fact that students didn't identified any of bullying behaviours that could happen on-line, which could pose serious problems, because the on-line environment is less accessible to teachers and parents and children should be aware about the phenomena and know how to identify, report and protect from cyberbullying.

The bullying behaviours were measured taking into account three dimensions, the author of the action (aggressor), the target of the action (victim) and the witness, each of which being measured along with other different actions related to the bullying act, such as exclusion or threat of exclusion from the group, threatening, physical violence, humiliation, destruction of property (Figure 03). Bullying behaviours initiated by an aggressor were less reported than as a victim of the bullying. And there is a strong correlation between initiating a bullying behaviour and being a male. The boys are more likely to initiate and witness a bullying behaviour as students. The difference from the gender perspective is statistically significant; there are no statistically significant differences taking into account the background environment, both urban and rural children claiming to do so to a similar extent.

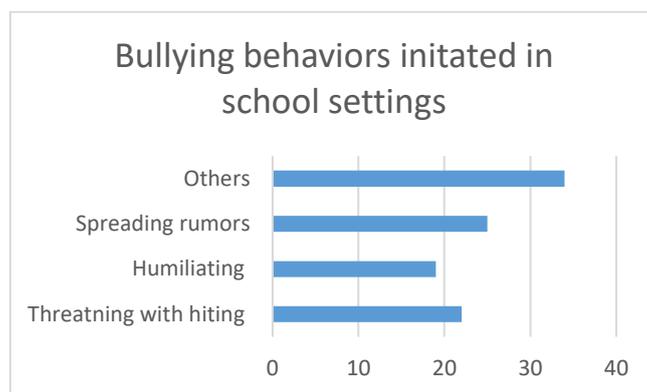


Figure 03. Distribution of types of bullying identified by respondents

With the regard to exploring bullying acts to students as victim of bullying, the results are with 5-11 % higher compare to the case of initiating a bullying act. Analysing the profile of the victims of bullying, we notice a series of statistically significant differences in the chances that the child is a victim of repeated harassment or abuse, including in family settings. We identified a dual relationship, both the perpetuation of abusive behaviours and the "habit" with the role of the victim. For example, children who have often been slapped or slapped by their parents often affirm that they have been embarrassed by other children, have been easily injured in the group or have been hit by other children. With regard, to bullying behaviours witnessed by the child, they were collected by teachers and also from the data collected from questionnaires by identifying situations that can easily be noticed in a typical social interaction. Clearly, children say they have witnessed bullying to higher extent than the aggressor or the victim situation. But these findings are useful in defining the size of the phenomenon in peer groups, taking into account all environments in which it may appear. Thus, 84% of the children who responded to the questionnaire state that they witnessed a

situation in which one child threatened another, 80% in which a child was humiliated by another child, 69% of hitting. The male to female ratio of bullies is 3 to 1.

Teachers during interviews reported that:

- Students who were bullied are unlikely to concentrate fully in the classroom.
- Some students tried to escape from being bullied by choosing not going to school.
- Some students who observed unchallenged bullying behavior copied this anti-social behavior.
- Some students looked distressed or anxious, and yet refused to say what is wrong (The results from the study identified strong relation between having a high depression and anxiety score and being a bully).
- Students deserve to feel safe and secure at home (e-safety), at school and on the way to and from school.

The research implemented through the 2 academic years (2015-2017) had effects on the changing the school environment and students' perception and attitude toward bullying phenomena. During questionnaire application, teachers were involved in collecting data and supporting children with techniques to recognize bullying behaviours, to identify and report them. During the second year the interviews with teachers reported some positive data on the increase of reporting bullying behaviours (with 12% more in the second year). Children behaviour were shaped with necessary skills to stand out and react towards a bullying action as in happens that children can be aggressors too. During our study, teachers became more aware of their power and responsibility to make the school environment safer and it gave them the space to experience different strategies regarding how to approach a bullying behaviour in schools. More equipped teachers had a positive effect on children's development and boosted their self-esteem and confidence in reporting bullying acts, in standing out for managing bullying actions within the schools, as well as outside.

7. Conclusion

Our research succeeded in meeting its objectives as it's shown in the results. The main aim of the study, to explore bullying phenomena, identified the alarming fact that a lot of students from Arges county never heard of bullying, and they don't know how to identify and what it means bullying and that bullying can happen in different settings, including on-line. Being said that, we think that this situation poses serious problems, because only by knowing to recognize and identify a situation and understand it, you can develop and apply strategies to report it and stand-out. Also, with regard to on-line bullying, the on-line environment is less accessible to teachers and parents and children should be aware about the phenomena and know how to identify, report and protect from cyberbullying. Bullying is unacceptable as it affects the social, emotional well-being and development of students and will not be tolerated in our school.

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